What kind of guidance can those worlds I call forests provide for living well on Earth in times of planetary ecological trouble? I approach this question as an anthropologist. That is, as someone who is committed to cultivating forms of radical listening as I move among modes of being that can, at times, dissolve me in my quest to understand who I am amid a larger flow of life that vastly exceeds me. My goal here is to use what I thus might learn to help find an orientation for us (humans) in our attempts to live well in relation to the many kinds of others that make and hold us.

Insofar as I am concerned with forests as vast networks of emergent relations among beings—both visible and invisible—this is an ecological project. Insofar as I aim to explore what forests can tell us about what this kind of life more generally is, this is an ontological project. Ontologically speaking, this is an exploration into the oneness from which we emerge and that emerges with us. As such, mine is a metaphysical claim of monism. That is, I hold that differences are second to oneness; they are not metaphysically prior. I am also making here an epistemological claim; namely, that we can, in a variety of registers—some formal, others more personal—come to know and feel this oneness. In as much as my interest is in learning from these living forests a modality of care and conduct that can guide us as we make our lives beside, and find our proper place among the living, the dead, those that may not neatly fit these categories, and those yet to come, this is an ethical project. Insofar as I am committed to collaboratively finding concrete ways to allow this living forest to be a continuing source of guidance, this is a political project.

As an anthropologist, I immerse myself in this exploration through the one method that is both unique to my field and available to anyone: ethnography. By ethnography I refer to a set of technologies for slowing down and liberating thought through a deep and sustained engagement with and attention to a place and the ways of
thinking (human as well as nonhuman) it holds. This engagement is undertaken with a view to understanding how the kind of thinking that emerges ethnographically displaces and deforms the ways I customarily think, with the additional goal of doing conceptual and practical work with that transformation. Moving among different, and seemingly disparate, modes of thought makes anthropology a form of shamanism. As such, its aim is to find the emergent frame that might unite these modes in the face of common concerns. This then, also makes this project a diplomatic one, perhaps, in Bruno Latour’s terms, one that involves a kind of “cosmic” diplomacy.

The place that holds my ethnographic attention is Ecuador’s “mega-diverse” tropical rainforest. It began over 25 years ago with my research in and around the Quichua (or Kichwa)-speaking Runa village of Ávila in the foothills of the Sumaco Volcano in Ecuador’s northwestern Amazon region and continues today in a much more collaborative vein with the Kichwa people of Sarayaku and the Sapara Nation, two neighboring communities in Ecuador’s vast and forested “south central” Amazon region, whose inhabitants, up to now, have concertedly, creatively, and successfully resisted the incursion of large scale extractive industries, logging, roads, and colonization. These communities are “cosmo-politan” in every sense of the term. Not only are some of their members highly adept at moving in worldly circles, systematically developing sophisticated political and media campaigns, reaching out to, and working with, Hollywood movie stars, and world leaders ranging from popes to presidents, as they present innovative solutions for local and planetary problems, but these efforts are also guided by a deep conceptual engagement with the polity of beings (including especially spirits) of that vast world—the cosmos—that they call the forest (sacha in Kichwa, naku in Sapara).

My current collaborative work involves, as well, a vibrant community of Ecuadorian lawyers, artists, intellectuals and environmentalists who are also connected to these communities and are deeply concerned with and committed to the forest, its peoples (human and nonhuman), and their various rights.

Alongside my more properly ethnographic research, working with this diverse collective of thinkers in the way I have over the last few years has also led me to create an experimental archeological museum in Quito concerned with a collection of shamanic figures, primarily from the pre-Hispanic Ecuadorian coast. This museum seeks, with Amazonian help, to anachronistically capacitate an archaic form of
animism for our times, recognizing that a central problem of our current geological epoch that we are increasingly calling the Anthropocene is time itself.

All of these projects are part of a larger one whose goal is to develop technologies for opening us to the spirit life that emerges with and is expressed by the kind of world that is a thinking forest and to find there a form of guidance that can be practically implemented today.

The foundation for this ethical and political project is the research that culminated in my book How Forests Think. That book is an ontological and diplomatic undertaking. It makes the following empirically buttressed ontological claims: 1) that forests indeed think; 2) that this thinking is different from what we normally take (human) thought to be; and 3) this thinking is also ours and thus available to us (humans). It then does the diplomatic work of showing how these claims simultaneously distort, revitalize, and unite, in ways that are sometimes unexpected, western scientific and Amazonian animistic understandings of life.

My current work builds on this by asking the following series of questions: If the kind of thinking that forests express—what I call sylvan thinking—is real, might it not also be good, and if it is good, might it not also be something to protect and nourish? This work, without being any less metaphysical or ethnographic is, then, more concerned with sylvan thinking in relation to the ethical and political problems of how to capacitate it as a mode of guidance for our times. For, as we face the unprecedented threat of whole-scale human-driven ecological destruction at a planetary level, the continuing life of thinking forests and the thoughts that emerge from them is what is at stake. My claim is that the thinking forests with which we can learn to think can provide their own form of ethical guidance for living in the “Anthropocene,” and that anthropology—the study of the human—is in a unique disciplinary position from which to address and develop this.

Central to this project is the assumption that the modes of thought we need to cultivate in order to achieve this must come from sylvan thinking itself. This in some sense makes this project—to be provocative—a “religious” one, in the sense that the goal is to find a way to open ourselves to a kind of thinking that lies beyond us. It is also “religious” in the sense that, for good formal as well as ethnographic reasons, I insist that forest thought expresses a mode of being that is akin to “spirit.”

My primary concern here is with the particular formal properties inherent to sylvan thinking that allow this kind of thought to take on this role. In this regard, I
consider the kind of thinking that forests express as “psychedelic” (literally mind or spirit manifesting, in keeping with the Greek etymology). Sylvan thinking expresses mind’s continual emergent manifestation in the form of spirit. I thus explore how to develop technologies (or methods) to capacitiate sylvan thinking that grow out of the psychedelic properties intrinsic to sylvan thinking. Central here are certain concepts drawn from philosopher Charles Peirce that draw on how thinking works in the sorts of imagistic (or iconic) registers that forests express, especially regarding the ways in which images are related to oneness. Along this vein I explore the mode of inference that he calls “abduction,” which involves the ways in which new concepts come to us that unite previous ones in the flash of their holistic emergence.

In thinking about anthropology as a “psychedelic science” I draw on the ethnographic consideration of psychedelic plant use in the Upper Amazon to understand more generally how anthropology can be thought of as a discipline concerned with making manifest the mind of a thinking world.

The abiding question that guides all of this is the ethical one of how to discern a mode of conduct—a sense for the “good path”—from the kinds of thoughts that emerge with a forest. Although ethics is usually—and rightly—considered a human concern, it also has ontological tendrils that reach into the nonhuman-thinking world that holds the human. In some basic sense this is because the question of value emerges with life; for, it is only with life that there emerge entities, for which questions of what is good and bad for them, are intrinsic to their mode of being. Our ethics stand in a relation of emergent continuity to this basic fact. But ethics is grounded in life in another sense as well. To get at this I consider Peirce’s claim that there is a larger kind of good out of which ethics emerges, which he calls the “aesthetic good.” For Peirce the aesthetic good involves moments when seemingly divergent parts come to be seen as part of a larger whole. This sense of good conforms to the Peircian logic that makes the icon (or image) and abduction, in a certain sense, primary modes of thought. He then argues that the ethical good stands in a relation of continuity to the aesthetic good from which it emerges. What counts as ethically good, then, must be an emergent product of this kind of oneness. With this in mind, I explore Amazonian shamanic attempts to discern a mode of conduct via communication with forest spirits, to show that these draw on a remarkably similar concept of the good because they too are grounded in the kind of abductive imagistic thinking that forest mind makes manifest to those who can listen for it.
My overall argument is encapsulated in the title of my book project: *Forest for the Trees*. Alluding to and tweaking the old adage that we are, “missing the forest for the trees,” I claim that that emergent general assemblage of living thoughts that we can call a forest can have something to say for the good of the “trees.”

The word “missing” is missing from my title, but nonetheless work with its absential resonances. For, the time we live in is marked politically and psychically by two things: 1) the denial of the recognition that we are living with an impending ecological crisis; and 2) a refusal to see how the worlds I call forests might provide spiritual guidance as we face this crisis. It is also marked by a temporal anxiety marked by the sensation that we are missing the moment when we can still do something about the impending ecological, by which I also mean in its broadest sense, *social*– catastrophe that we Earth-bound creatures are currently facing. This is coupled by the the uneasy feeling that our time is somehow out of whack with the other kinds of temporalities (geological and otherwise) with which it intersects at this moment.

My title refers to trees in all of their woody sentience, but also, by extension, to the broader collectives or societies of beings that both give rise to forests and are held, sustained, and guided by them. We are all trees, and all us tree-like creatures have a forest –by which I mean spirit– aspect to us. To think with forests and to constantly ask ourselves what good those thoughts that come from forests are for: this is an anthropological problem because it a human one. We humans are the ones who must continuously cultivate the art of listening to forests. This is what it would mean to “ecologize” thought. And it is we humans (many of us at least) who have stopped listening.

To conclude, then, *Forest for the Trees* is a kind of manifesto. It is a call to recognize a spirit guidance that emerges from the dense ecologies of selves that hold and make each and every one of us. As such, I am not its author. I, along with others, such as the Sarayaku and Sapara peoples, are striving to find the technologies and idioms through which *forest mind* can become manifest through us. The end of this endeavor is to find practical ways to allow sylvan thought’s endless dynamic of end making and unmaking to continue to exist. If this is a worthy endeavor it is because it is already faithful to something about us, and our world, that we always knew to be true.